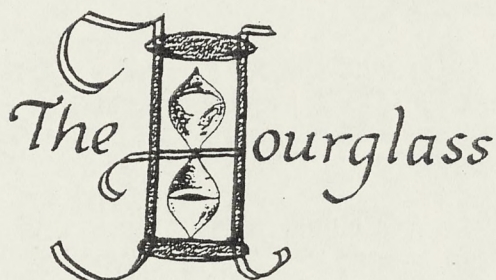


Historical Society of Palm Desert

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LIFE ON A DATE RANCH by Frances Gay Webb

Once upon a time there was a young man named Robert Williams Webb, Jr. (1902-1996) who lived in Minneapolis. When he was a sophomore at the University of Minneapolis he became quite ill. After some time in a sanitarium, the doctor advised him to go to the desert if he wanted to get well. Time spent at the Desert Inn in Palm Springs brought him back to health, and he decided to live in the area during the winter.

He bought 40 acres and did some construction and well-digging on his land. After planting date off-shoots on 20 acres, he decided to attend the University of Arizona to study date culture. After receiving his degree, he came back to watch his dates grow. It took seven years, so he had time.

There was also plenty of time for him to meet and marry a girl two years his junior. She was Frances Gay of Iowa City, Iowa and Redlands, California. Frances worked as the children's librarian at the A. K. Smiley Library. They tied the knot in March of 1932. Would this city girl cotton to a lonely life in the desert? As Frances says, "The desert was beginning to develop, and it has never stopped."

To the young bride, traveling south from Redlands on the roller-coaster highway was a memorable occasion in the 1930s. The narrow black-topped road close to the foothills approached Palm Springs, where the lights of the Desert Inn were inviting. Perhaps a light or two was seen in Cathedral City. On and on they went in the dark, noticing a snake stretched out on the road and often seeing a coyote running away. Then there was a long stretch of darkness, no lights; Palm Desert was not yet born.

Finally they came to the dirt road which Bob maintained with his tractor and drag. It was a quarter of a mile past Bert and Clarice Cavanagh's adobe house. There it was, their fenced-in date garden and little house, their castle. Also on the property was a large, circular reservoir-pool about 52 feet in diameter and 4 feet high, and a pump house with an electric motor and a water tank on top. The remaining buildings on the ranch consisted of a "submarine," a house for the foreman, a garage, a shop and a pollen house.

The "submarine" was a small place with tin sides covered with burlap. A false roof held a perforated pipe attached to a hose. On hot days they rested there in a temperature several degrees cooler than outside. Later they installed a "desert cooler" in a window of the house.

There was electricity for cooking and for a large refrigerator. Running water was supplied by two wells, each were over 200 feet deep. Eventually, a septic tank and plumbing fixtures were installed. At first there was no phone, but finally they paid to have the poles and wires brought in from Highway 111.

The home was furnished with Navajo rugs, Mexican painted furniture, and a Franklin stove, i.e. open fireplace. An artistic Englishman who served as the local blacksmith, Mr. Woodhouse, fashioned the light fixtures. Later on they planted citrus fruit, pecans and dates.

During their time on the ranch two children came on the scene. A son, Robert III, was born toward the end of 1934 and Alice-Ann came along late in 1939. "Bob and I were adjusting to marriage, housekeeping, cooking, being social, becoming parents and supporting a date garden. We had all this to keep us happy," Frances reminisces.

When General Patton moved into the desert west of them, they rented the house to an officer and moved to Redlands. There Bob worked in an aircraft factory during the war. Frances did volunteer work at the hospital. When they returned to the desert, the roads had been named and there was now a town called Palm Desert.

In 1939 their street was named after Mr. Caleb Cook, who owned the first big date garden and sold off-shoots to newcomers. Fairway Drive was the south boundary. Beyond that was a polo field and the flood channel. There were floods and earthquakes. Lightening would sometimes strike a palm and burn it so badly that it died.

A Mexican Heinz terrier, named Dog-Dammit-Queenie, was the guardian of the family. Three times it survived snake bite, and ended up dying under the trees chasing a cat. There was also a flock of bantam chickens until the coyotes helped themselves to all but one little peep. Bob brought him inside for Frances' T.L.C. Since the little guy was always under foot, she lined an apron pocket with a napkin (no Kleenex yet) and carried him around till he grew up. There were several beautiful oriole nests hanging under the date palms. They were woven from fibers stripped from the leaves.

Indio was the closest place to buy groceries, to see a dentist or a doctor, and to attend church and enjoy friends. During that time there were many young couples in business in Indio. Playing bridge was one of the social activities through which the Webbs got to know people. There were two bankers, Taylor and Mullen, and their wives. Other participants included a store owner named Eckert, a dentist named Purcell, a newspaper owner named Grant, a landscape designer named Waldron, and six date growers: Cook, Cosgrove, Mitchell, Walker, Buck, and Van der Meid. Neighbors included Cavanagh, Cook, Beck, Ripple, Arkell, and P. L. Day - the surveyor.

For a change of pace they went to the Desert Inn or the Doll House in Palm Springs for dinner. Earle Strebe showed movies at Frances Stephens School. A favorite hike was up to Philip Boyd's sand dune, now the Living Desert. Sometimes they would go to the dunes north of the highway to look for pottery shards. Also something to see was the rushing river (ditch) after a rainstorm.

During the summer the Webbs might experience a real change by leaving the Coachella Valley. Some of the places visited were Laguna Beach, Oak Glen, Idyllwild, Redlands and Minneapolis. Upon their return, they knew there would be work to do. In the Fall the date harvest began.

Dates were never grown from seed, but from off-shoots of the male and female mature date palms. One male for every 20 females was needed. Before pollination the crew dethorned the leaf stalks and tied bunches of dates to them; otherwise, the stalks might break from the weight of the dates. The male produced large pods of pollen-laden threads; a few of these threads were tied into the female blooms. This procedure was used until Bob invented the vacuum method of extracting the pollen and puffing it into the blooms. The center of a female bloom was cut out and the end cut off before the paper bag was tied over the whole bunch. The bag was protection from rain and wind damage.

When harvest time came, the crews came with ladders and picked each date which was ripe. Over and over they picked. The crop was taken to the California Date Packing House in Indio where it was processed for shipment. After all the dates were picked, the crew came to cut off the bunches.

Pickers always had to watch out for black widow spiders. Bob gave each picker a little bottle of ammonia to be applied in case he was bitten. The picker was to come immediately to the house, where an alcohol pack was applied and the picker was instructed to lie down for a while. A few men got spider bites, but with no serious effects.

That's the story of a young man from Minneapolis and his wife, and how they raised dates in what is now Indian Wells. This lady was born in 1904.....you do the math. She has a delightful personality, a sharp mind, and carries on a great conversation. Fortunate are they who know her as a friend.

NEW MEMBERS

Frances Gay Webb - Contributing
Ken & Catherine Cooke
Fred Daniel/Stacy Krikorian
Lorrie Lefevre Dunham

Kubas, Natalie
Concheta Chaudoin
Sharon Meyerhoff

Chief John & Rhea McLaughlin
Eleanor "Suzy" Cresswell
Bernie & Barbara Cain
Susan Lefevre Johnson

We Hold in Loving Memory

Jane Cameron

MEMBERSHIP DUES

Beginning in the year 2003, we have decided to use the calendar year method of collecting dues for the Society. This change was made in order to avoid confusion. So from now on, your membership dues should be paid on January 1 of each year.

If you paid within the last couple of months, your membership card will read: 2003.

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|---------------------------|--|
| • Individual.....\$ 15 | • Patron.....\$ 250 |
| • Family.....\$ 20 | • Business/Organizations...1st year \$ 75, Renewal \$ 50 |
| • Contributing.....\$ 100 | • Life (single or married couple).....\$ 1000 |

Mail checks to: Historical Society of Palm Desert - P.O. Box 77 - Palm Desert, CA 92261
Hourglass newsletter - Winter 2002



*In Fond Memory of Mary Louise Noble
(2-28-29 - 6-8-02)*

Mary Lou was born in Pittsburg, Kansas. After graduating from Muskingum College in 1951, she indulged her interest in fashion by working at Macy's for two years. Then she decided for more education at Kansas State Teacher's College, where she received her credential in 1955. In California she taught elementary school in San Bernardino and San Francisco. Married in 1958, their only daughter was born in 1963.

In 1981 Mary Lou and daughter Linda moved to Palm Desert. She had a strong faith in God, and became an active member of Family Life Church.

At the Society, we remember her for long-time membership, faithful participation in Mini-Muster activities, and chairing the telephone calling committee. We miss her gentle personality and thoughtful ways.

**THESE PAST MONTHS HAVE BEEN
BUSY - BUSY - BUSY**

New Firefighters' Exhibit:

For about 4 months now, some of our diligent members have been planning, designing, executing — in preparation for a major exhibit at the historic firehouse. In September the remodeling project of the center portion of the building was completed. Hal Rover, our new president, acted as general contractor on this job.

Bob & Carolyn Green, of "Fire Memories" museum, have agreed to loan the Society many of their valuable antiques for this display. Dan Callahan has been available on a consulting basis. Jan Holmlund is providing her professional expertise in museum management to make sure everything is done in the best possible manner.

Along with his friend, Dan Baxley, Hal has built dozens of display pedestals and painted them white. They are very professionally done, and the donation of this work has helped the Society in keeping costs down. Vitrines, clear plastic security covers, have been purchased to keep the antiques safe while on exhibit.

Since fire protection measures are still to be taken, our best guess is that the exhibit will be open in January — or mid-December at the earliest. You won't want to miss the grand opening.....watch for details.

Mini-Muster in October:

Thanks to Dan and BJ Callahan our fire safety program enjoyed another successful run. Jan Holmlund took care of the planning and the mountain of paperwork involved in this annual project. Fire Station #33 firefighters do much of the work, and this is coordinated with the Desert Sands Unified School District for its third graders. This event could not happen without the generosity of the dozens of volunteers who participate each year.

Volunteers & Docents:

Jean Ernst chaired meetings on Nov. 7 and Dec. 5. It was determined that at least two people will be needed during operating hours in addition to the office manager. One will welcome visitors and the other will show them around the new firefighters' exhibit. The next monthly training meeting is scheduled for Jan. 9 at 10 a.m. A sign-up calendar with monthly/weekly slots is available. Please drop by and fill in your preferences.

Yard Sale:

Chaired by Karen Hirdler on Saturday, Oct. 26, this event topped last year's proceeds. Many helpers made sure everything was priced and displayed. We also had to deal with the Friday evening rain that tried to dampen our spirits, but to no avail. If you participated as a worker, a donor, or a shopper – we extend our appreciation. "Thank you" sometimes seems inadequate to express our feelings!

Fall Luncheon:

At this event we got our officers and new board installed, and heard an entertaining and informative talk by Carl Garsczynski on weather in the Coachella Valley. Here again there are so many people to be thanked, but most especially Yvonne Kelley and Helene Harrison who chaired this function. We had the largest turnout ever.

- Society officers: Hal Rover (Pres.), Joyce White (Vice-Pres.), Bonnie Bowie (Sec.), and Bob Wilmeth (Treas.), Ginny Folkers (Past-Pres.)
- New Board Members: Harold Bird, Lois Bradstreet, Helene Harrison, Roger Hirdler, Bud Lesser, Bill O'Neil, Jim Young & Kay Young
- Returning Board Members: Barbara Keedy Eastes, Jean Ernst

Blueprints & By-Laws:

Joyce White continues to process the blueprints the Society inherited from the Palm Desert Property Owners Association. We have been successful in getting house plans into the hands of a few of the owners. Having the plans saves money in architectural fees, locating plumbing and electrical lines, etc. If you receive a postcard, we have found your plans and are willing to relinquish them to you for a donation. Please call the office.

It has been determined that the by-law revisions still need some fine-tuning. So they will be ready for your vote of approval at the Spring Luncheon.

"Thank Yous" for Free Services:

- Jack Bowie - for responding so quickly to an emergency plumbing problem....everything is now flowing in the correct channels....and all is well at the fire house.
- Larry Chenk - with JPH Enterprises in Indio for storing our fire truck at his facility during the summer months.
- Phil Furnari - with California Desert Nursery in Bermuda Dunes for providing plants to landscape the west extension of the Society's front yard.
- Fred Daniel - who specializes in graphic/web site design and advertising is working on a new logo for the Society. He studied in San Jose and has been in this field for 25 years. He serves many high-profile desert organizations.

"The Creative Bunch" - 74-581 Pepper Tree Dr.
Palm Desert, CA 92260 Phone: 773-0010,
e-mail: headfred@society.com

Fred is also the president (Head Fred) of The FRED Society. This is a 4500 member international organization of Freds. Their purpose is to the improve the image of Freds all over the world.



OFFICE MANAGERS - Coming/Going:

After the publication of our last newsletter, Vic Scott responded to our ad and worked for the Society for a short time.....until the B.L.M. offered her a position.

Barbara Keedy Eastes was our source of info about **Ann Tuttle**, a lovely lady who works part-time for her at the College of the Desert. Our position on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays has dove-tailed nicely with the C.O.D. job, so we now have a new Office Manager. When you call, say "Hello" to Ann. We hope she will be staying with us for a long, long time.

DONATIONS:

Laurie Corbett.....Ernie & Betty Maxwell,
Palm Desert Progress newspapers
Curtis Cohee.....P.D.P.O.A. paperwork
Eleanor Cresswell.....two desert books
Jack & Bonnie Bowie.....Desert Sun coffee-
table pictorial book

UP-COMING EVENTS:

(mark you calendars)

- March 30.....Ed Mullins Annual Picnic
details in Spring newsletter
- April 6.....Booth at Springfest 2003
Chairperson = Barbara Keedy Eastes
- April 23.....Spring Luncheon
Chairperson = Jean Hollenbeck

NEW EXHIBITS in December:

- "Christmas Village" - Helen Oliver loan
- "Dickens Society" - Fay Bowie donation

About FRESH bread:

Bread is delivered to stores five days a week. Each day they use a different color twist tie or plastic seal tab.

- Monday - blue
- Tuesday - green
- Thursday - red
- Friday - white
- Saturday - yellow

So if you are shopping on Thursday, look for a red tie.....a white one is a week old.

Happy Holidays!!

Editor: Ginny Folkers

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